

# Demjanjuk Trial On Center Stage

By Hugh Orgel

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Israeli defense counsel Yoram Sheffler was severely reprimanded for labelling as a "show trial" the "Ivan the Terrible" war crimes trial in Jerusalem.

He apologized to the panel of three judges in chamber, in court and again in a television interview. Yet, as he noted, the trial of John Demjanjuk is taking place in a converted movie theater in the Binyanei Haoooma Convention Center.

And the theater-like atmosphere was evident almost from the moment the trial opened, when Demjanjuk's American defense attorney, Mark O'Connor, turned to address the audience. He immediately was chided by Judge Dov Levin, who told him sternly that "in an Israeli court, the attorneys face and address the bench."

O'Connor's behavior may have been a slip -- as an American attorney he is used to addressing a jury -- and since then he has carefully kept his back to the audience and face to the judges or witnesses.

But for the spectators who have been packing the courtroom daily since the trial opened some seven weeks ago, and for those who view the four-days-a-week proceedings on live broadcasts over an experimental TV station being prepared for use as Israel's second TV channel, the comparison with a stage show is inevitable.

The courtroom itself has been set up on the theater stage, with the spectators seated in the hall. The balcony has been taken over by local and foreign television crews.

The judges' bench sits on a dais at the back of the stage. In front of them sit the court clerk who deals with the thousands of documents being presented as evidence, filing them as they are marked for later identification by the presiding judge, Levin. The bailiff sits in a corner.

The accused, flanked by two prison guards and an interpreter, sits on a raised dais to the right of the bench (left to the audience) with his defense attorneys at a bench slightly below him.

The prosecution table is on the right side of the stage, as viewed from the hall, beside the chair and desk for the witnesses.

The television cameras in constant operation are a departure from normal practice in Israel. The only previous occasion for such live media coverage in an Israeli courtroom was at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961.

The audience section of the courtroom is filled to capacity at each of the morning and afternoon sessions Monday-Thursday, and an overflow audience watches on giant television screens in a nearby hall.

This rapt attention has persisted although the drama of early weeks -- when survivors of Treblinka death camp told of their experiences -- has slowed to tedium. The proceedings are now devoted almost entirely to prosecution witnesses parading a vast amount of detailed statistics and dry camp procedures. This is to set the scene for more formal evidence to show that Demjanjuk is the notorious Treblinka guard known as "Ivan the Terrible."

The slowness is largely due to the exceptional amount of translation and interpretation needed for this multilingual trial. The official language of the court is Hebrew, meaning every word spoken in another language must be translated.

The accused, brought to Israel from Cleveland, Ohio, in the U.S., where he lived for many years is Ukrainian. His defense attorneys, apart from Sheffler, are non-Hebrew-speaking Americans.

The witnesses have been Israelis, South Americans or Germans, speaking variously Hebrew, Yiddish or German. Their remarks have been translated into Hebrew and then read aloud to the court. But they have been simultaneously

translated through stethoscope-like earphones draped around the heads of special listeners -- into English for the lawyer and Ukrainian for the accused.

The English questions to the witnesses and remarks to the bench by O'Connor and John Gill, his American assistant, are translated into Hebrew, then read aloud by the court interpreter. The replies, in various languages, are heard by the lawyers in a simultaneous English translation through their earphones.

The judges and many of the witnesses are fully conversant with English, and the witnesses -- and even sometimes the judges -- have often forgotten to await the Hebrew translation before they began their replies.

At times O'Connor, finger pressed to his earphone and a puzzled look on his face, has requested the court for clarification of what neither the judges nor the spectators have heard -- an apparent problem with the translation or his equipment, or noise from the shuffling of papers near the interpreter's desks.

Several times the defense has requested a delay to allow it time to translate into English the thousands of pages of documentation presented to the court as evidence, which the prosecution has had ample time to translate and study while preparing its case.

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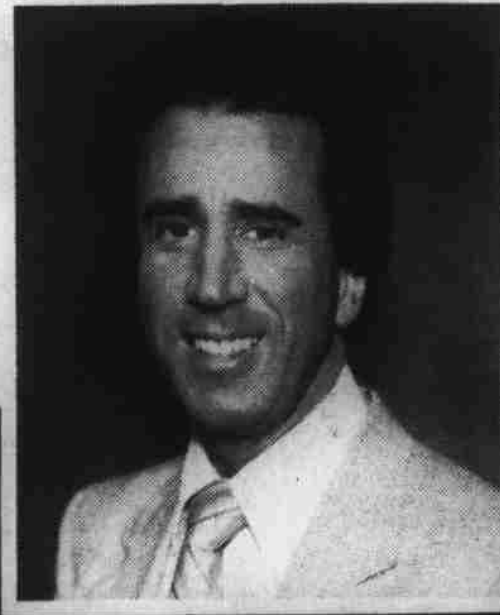


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